

Health and Salvation for the World

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks
Sunday 28 June 2020

“...at once they were both healed and gave thanks to God. ‘Jesu’, said Sir Percival, what may this mean that we are thus healed?’ ‘I know well’, said Sir Hector, ‘it is by what is within this holy chalice that we are most blessed: the holy body and blood of the Lord Jesus’.”

So runs Mallory’s ‘Le Morte D’Arthur’ in the epic story of the Quest for the Holy Grail – the legendary chalice in which St Joseph of Arimathea is supposed to have safeguarded the Blood of Jesus flowing from the Cross.

Romantic legend it might be, yet the image of the chalice touches into a deep truth and vital reality about our Christian faith: “the very word ‘Chalice’ is beautiful music and deep joy”¹.

For Body and Blood, Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion – it’s one of the things that defines us as Christians. The altar stands at the centre of our cathedrals and abbeys, chapels and churches because it is the place where we do the thing which Jesus commanded us, to ‘do this in remembrance of me’. Of all the parting gifts Jesus could have left us, he chose a simple meal of bread and wine. Each time we take the cup and break the bread we recall and give thanks (Eucharist means ‘thanksgiving’) for birth, passion, death, resurrection and the sending the Holy Spirit – for the health and salvation of the whole world.

That’s why, all during this Covid-19 pandemic not one day has passed without a member of the cathedral clergy or auxiliary clergy taking bread, taking the chalice, not for him- or herself, but for the health and salvation of the world – and more specifically here for the communities of Suffolk that we serve.

The breaking of the bread – even when apparently the solitary act of one priest in a closed church – is the making visible for the community of the presence of Jesus, accessible always and everywhere, the one who brings peace and strength and healing and joy.

What’s been immensely moving for me is to know that, even though our congregations (and Christians across Suffolk and across the world) have not been able to be physically present, and although at one level it has felt hugely lonely presiding alone or with one other member of my household – usually my wife Janet – it has been extraordinarily powerful to know that hundreds of devices are out there, as you are now, each person or family joining me and engaging with the screen, and praying that whether receiving body and blood physically or not, Christ will enter spiritually into our very being, that we might be at one with him and he with us.

Little did I know when I was ordained 27 years ago that I’d have to be a sound engineer and film director: I can’t tell you how stressful it was at the start of livestreaming from home – just to think about simple things like what distractions there might be in the camera frame (like the family dog wandering about or barking, the pile of books or papers lying around, will the phone ring or the postman knock).

And that same worry has been transferred to Rachel, our Head Verger, as livestreaming from inside the cathedral became permissible – who, with all the technological challenges has done a fabulous job for us, weaving into livestream the pre-recorded items from our wonderful musicians, readers, preachers, intercessors.

I’ve an image in my mind of pre-Reformation times when the faithful were denied Communion and would only gather around a

squint or a rood screen and peer in, to see the real presence in chalice and bread. A different kind of screen you're looking through now, praying that Christ will enter spiritually into your life, your home, your heart, your life.

Unless government controls change again, from next Sunday it is a relief and a joy to know that we're allowed to welcome congregations back into our cathedrals and churches for worship. – albeit in limited numbers and receiving communion in one kind only for a spell longer – and we will continue to livestream for a good while for those who still cannot come physically - all the details of how to book to come to Sunday services is on the cathedral website.

In today's readings we've heard that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6) and "whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Matthew 10).

As we begin to open churches for worship we can think afresh about the deep importance of the sacrament. For me there are two vitally important things here: First, when Jesus speaks in John's gospel of his flesh being true food and his blood true drink he is not saying that he will be changed into physical bread and wine. Rather Jesus is saying that if you want to know what is true food, real food, if you want to know what will give us real life, eternal life, then you need to believe in him, receive him, eat of him. It is when we receive him by faith we receive the real food.

But, second, there's also something vitally important about receiving chalice and bread physically, something which has been so absent in these months of lockdown. For there is something deeply incarnational about the physicality of our church buildings – which speak of the presence of Jesus; of people coming together physically in community – making Jesus present; of physical bread and wine – making Jesus present. For this physicality is also partly

what defines us as Christians for it speaks of incarnation, the physicality of God becoming human, real flesh, real blood.

So as we look towards public worship being possible again, what a relief and real joy that soon these two things, the spiritual and the physical, can gradually come together again, Christ being present in the sacrament, bringing healing and salvation for us and for the whole world.

Meanwhile we can continue to say with Sir Percival "what may this mean, that we are thus healed?", and hear again the truth and reality of our Christian faith "it is what is within this holy Chalice that we are most blessed".

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¹ *Mark Deeper into God, Brother Ramon SSF*



The Attainment: The Vision of the Holy Grail
Edward Burne-Jones/William Morris, 1895
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Galahad_grail.jpg